

Nature

Walking North Hill: The Beauty Is in the Details



North Hill is filled with deer, opossums, raccoons, red and gray squirrels and chipmunks.

Staff Photos by Chris Bernstein

Collins-Hughes

At the edge of North Hill, a pine suddenly bends down and its branches resemble a pile of laundry lint. They are owl pellets left by a great horned owl high in the branches of the pine. The Massachusetts Audubon Society's South Shore Sanctuaries director, David Clapp, deduces, probably ate white-throats — a statement he supports by showing it from the fur, he slowly, drags a half-inch-long tooth shaped like a

sk. "It went all the way back into the forest with Clapp is to see and hear an escape notice. Listening to the classical music connoisseur who can play violinist from the rest of the orchestra," he says, searching the treetops for

the pine warbler that trilled a moment before. Then he tries a call of his own: "Ch ch ch ch ch."

North Hill is, Clapp says, "a remarkable place for birds," home to tree swallows, chickadees, thrushes, vireos, osprey, ducks, kingfishers, various warblers and other feathered creatures. The forest of white and pitch pines is filled with deer and what Clapp terms "suburban-type things": opossums, raccoons, red and gray squirrels, chipmunks. Mink and muskrats live in

allows each of them to use the land for their own, sometimes opposing, purposes. The town takes the water and allows people to walk their dogs and ride their mountain bikes in the woods, while Audubon land, closer to the shore, is mostly trail-free by now, a haven for animals.

It is also fertile ground for Audubon researchers, who at this time of year use the area to study vernal pools and amphibians and reptiles. They have done the year's first circling of the marsh to look for early dragon and damselflies, and they will conduct a twice-weekly bird census during the breeding season that starts later this month.

"It's just good for your soul to come out in these spaces."

— David Clapp, South Shore Sanctuaries director

Some of the research is almost comically common-sensical. Behind a stand of young white pines in a small clearing is a "herps rug," one of 20 stations in the herpetological census. Lying on the long grass is a board, measuring one-half by 1 meter; placed perpendicular to form a T shape is a rug the same size. The object is to see what kinds of small mammals, amphibians and reptiles crawl underneath them. Lists, updated every two

weeks when the ground is not frozen, detail the number of meadow voles, white-footed mice, red-backed salamanders, black racers and garter and green snakes found at each location.

"And in this case," Clapp laughs, lifting the board to peer underneath, "you might just put 'ants.'"

That might disappoint some researchers, but not him. The less glamorous things are the ones that catch his attention:

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David Clapp, director of the Massachusetts Audubon Society's South Shore Sanctuaries.

The 750-acre parcel of land known as North Hill is owned mainly by the Town of Duxbury, which uses it for conservation, recreation and the water it supplies to two wells and the North Hill Country Club golf course. The Audubon Society owns the interior 120 acres, 90 of which comprise the marsh. Its mission is to provide a safe place for wildlife. Over the years, through sometimes intense negotiations, the town and Audubon have cobbled together an arrangement that



Amphibians share North Hill with birds, reptiles and mammals large and small.

North Hill

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the plants at the edge of the water, the climate, the soil, the water level, the mice larger animals feed on. These are the factors that determine what kind of population the area can support. Clapp says it is as crucial for naturalists to understand these things as it is for a builder to understand the foundation of a structure.

"From that, you get a sense of how the rest of that builds. Everybody likes the big stuff: the hawks and the foxes and the deer. But those are..." he trails off, searching for a tactful way to phrase it. "I take people to Africa a lot, and people always want to see lions. To me, lions are just covered with flies and ticks, and they're lazy and they sleep all the time. I'd rather look at dung beetles and hedgehogs and the small antelope. The little stuff. You watch a lion and that's like watching the royal family. It's interesting sometimes, but it's not real life."

His biggest real-life concern about North Hill is its water level, which he says could be affected by the town's second well, built on 5-and-a-half acres of former Audubon land the organization swapped for a shoreline piece of town land in 1995.

"In a very dry season like we've had the past two summers, the water can go down 18 inches normally," he says, adding that any additional drop in the water level could alter the wetland community.

The town is monitoring the water level, however, and Clapp seems confident that the process will work.

"I just hope that this wetland will remain very productive," he says. "I'm sure it will."



In a vernal pool, a resident frog lingers (left).

Staff Photo by Chris Bernstein

Walking down a path through the trees, he keeps his eyes peeled for any signs of activity. Crouching to the ground, he grabs a twig and starts poking at weathered strips of fur lying in the sandy dirt.

"This is a rabbit that was eaten by a fox, and the fur has now passed through the fox's body," he explains. The fox droppings, he says, have been cleaned by rain, leaving only the fur behind — along with a telltale curl on the ends of the strips, characteristic of fox droppings.

Clapp is full of such knowledge. "These are white pines. There are five needles in a clump. They're soft and long," he says, walking among a cluster of them. "Pitch pine has three needles, like three strikes and you're out."

He knows which wood-duck box last year housed a red-phase screech owl alongside wood-duck egg shells from the previous summer's residents. He knows how

many fledgling tree swallows — about 500 — come out of the marsh's deadwood swamp each year.

"The more you know about (other life forms), the more thoughtful decisions you can make about how to treat the land," he says. "They've got as much right to exist on this planet as we do. And right now as an animal species, we're exerting a great influence on this planet."

He circles back to the clearing near the herpetological census site, where the ground is carpeted with long grass, matted after the winter. Clapp's eyes are on it as he walks, and he freezes in mid-stride.

"That's a garter snake," he says, excitement in his voice as a small and slender snake glides rapidly across the grass. Then the excitement grows. "No, it's not. It's a ribbon snake."

In an instant, he has lunged for it and scooped it up. He holds it

up in one hand as it writhes, its mouth opening and closing silently. It is an elegant creature in the bright sunlight, its brown and cream-yellow stripes befitting its name. It is less common than the garter snake, and seeing it is something for the census. After a few moments, he releases it back into the grass, and it glides swiftly away.

"It's just good for your soul to come out in these spaces," Clapp says, ticking off the purposes North Hill serves: open space, water supply and a place for plants and animals to live. Even the new well, a source of worry to him, is also a source of comfort. The area will be protected, he says, because the town's water supply needs to be protected.

"Everybody wins because it will stay like this," he says, "and in the meantime the wildlife community will be protected and safe in a place that will last forever."



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